

Is it the PR, or the Policy?

by Bill Berkowitz

Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber's new book, "The Best War Ever," exposes failed propaganda efforts by the Bush Administration

In a recent speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared that, "The enemy is so much better at communicating. I wish we were better at countering that because the constant drumbeat of things they say -- all of which are not true -- is harmful." During a question-and-answer session at Fallon Naval Air Station in Nevada, Rumsfeld complained about terrorist groups that have "media committees" that "manipulate the media".

"What bothers me the most is how clever the enemy is," he said. "They are actively manipulating the media in this country... They can lie with impunity." During the three-plus years since the U.S. invaded Iraq, the Bush Administration has repeatedly criticized the media for reporting only the "bad" news from Iraq. President Bush has frequently maintained that the consequences of the media's preoccupation with negative stories demoralizes the troops on the ground, and undercuts support for the war at home. Invaded Iraq, the Bush Administration has repeatedly criticized the media for reporting only the "bad" news from Iraq. Never mind that there were few complaints from the administration at the beginning of the war when an embedded and compliant media filed mostly positive reports. In their new book titled "The Best War Ever: Lies, Damned Lies, and the Mess in Iraq" (Tarcher/Penguin, 2006), which went on sale last week, co-authors Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber assert that television reporters "actually underplayed rather than overplayed the negative" in their reporting from Iraq, while "newspaper coverage during the subsequent occupation has also been sanitized." Rampton and Stauber cite a study by researchers at George Washington University that analyzed 1,820 stories on five U.S. television networks: ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox News, as well as the Arab satellite channel Al Jazeera, and found that "all of the American media largely shied away from showing visuals of coalition, Iraqi military, or civilian casualties. Despite advanced technologies offering reporters the chance to transmit the reality of war in real time, reporters chose instead to present a largely bloodless conflict to viewers even when they did broadcast during firefights." Print journalists didn't perform much better. A May 2005 review by Los Angeles Times writer James Rainey of the coverage of a six-month period -- when 559 U.S. and Western allies died in Iraq -- by six major U.S. newspapers and two popular newsmagazines found that "readers of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and Washington Post did not see a single picture of a dead serviceman." "Rumsfeld's complaints are an interesting twist of the truth since the reality is that the United States has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on media campaigns that have been spectacularly ineffective," Rampton told me in a telephone interview. "That the enemy has been more effective in communicating its message to the world is not so much a reflection of their media savvy as it is on the ineffective message of the United States." "You can't expect a better messaging strategy to compensate for the fact that the underlining policy is based on falsehoods and deliberate deception," Rampton said.

As the occupation of Iraq proved unmanageable and the total number of dead and wounded U.S. military personnel mounted, stories about the revamping of schoolhouses, re-supplying of hospitals, and the building of soccer fields were given a backseat by the media. With things continuing to spiral out of control in Iraq, the Bush administration has once again decided that it's a public relations problem; a question of propaganda not policy. Around the same time that Rumsfeld was on the road railing about anti-war appeasers and confused critics that were enabling terrorism, and how much better the terrorists were in handling the media, the Washington Post reported that "U.S. military leaders in Baghdad have put out for bid a two-year, 20-million-dollar public relations contract that calls for extensive monitoring of U.S. and Middle Eastern media in an effort to promote more positive coverage of news from Iraq." According to the Post's Walter Pincus, the "contract calls for assembling a database of selected news stories and assessing their tone as part of a program to provide 'public relations products' that would improve coverage of the military command's performance, according to a statement of work attached to the proposal." Pincus pointed out that the proposal "calls in part for extensive monitoring and analysis of Iraqi, Middle Eastern and American media, [and] is designed to help the coalition forces understand 'the communications environment.' Its goal is to 'develop communication strategies and tactics, identify opportunities, and execute events... to effectively communicate Iraqi government and coalition's goals, and build support among our strategic audiences in achieving these goals,'" according to a statement publicly available through the FBO Daily's Web site. "From what I've seen, the thing about this proposal that most concerns me is the component calling for the monitoring of the media, especially when journalists will be rated as to how favorable they are toward U.S. policy objectives," Rampton pointed out. "Monitoring journalists and maintaining a database of their stories raises a number of serious questions: Who knows where that database will wind up in two years or five years from now? What kind of retribution might be exacted against those reporters whose work is seen as unfavorable to U.S. policy?" The administration's new maneuver appears to be dÃ©jÃ vu all over again.

As early as September 2003, less than six months after the invasion of Iraq, it determined that the best way to sell its policy was to make its highest ranking officials -- including the president -- available for safe media opportunities. President Bush gave the Fox News Channel a 30-minute interview and a 20-minute on-camera tour of the White House while then-National Security Advisor and current Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice appeared on ABC's "Nightline" and gave interviews to Fox television's Brit Hume and Bill O'Reilly and to conservative radio talk show host Sean Hannity. A later campaign was aimed at sidestepping the mainstream media entirely by dispatching administration spokespersons to talk only to local news outlets.

Another campaign had the administration hiring the Lincoln Group, a high-powered public relations firm, to plant positive stories in the Iraqi news media and to pay friendly Iraqi journalists monthly stipends. "In the first chapter of 'The Best War Ever,' we discuss the failures of recent attempts by the U.S. to plant stories in the Iraq media," Rampton noted. "You can't throw money at a messaging problem and expect to be effective when the people you are trying to persuade are deeply outraged at what you are doing."

Rampton and Stauber document how money that was "thrown" to public relations outfits in order to have them promote the war in Iraq:

"Lincoln partnered initially with the Rendon Group, a public relations firm that had already played a major role in leading the U.S. into war through its work for Ahmed Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress. A few weeks later, Rendon dropped out of the project and left Lincoln in charge. Lincoln hired another Washington-based public relations firm as a subcontractor -- BKSH & Associates, headed by Republican political strategist Charles R. Black, Jr. BKSH is a subsidiary of Burson-Marszteller, a PR firm whose previous experience in Iraq also included work for Chalabi and the INC. Other Pentagon contracts for public relations work were awarded to SYColeman Inc. of Arlington, Virginia, and Science Applications International Corporation. All totaled, the PR contracts added up to \$300 million over a five-year period." Over the course of the war and occupation of Iraq, even the parameters of what constitutes "good" news has changed dramatically. Early on, the "good" news consisted of reports on the rebuilding of schools and hospitals, the delivery of new fire trucks to a small town, or the opening of soccer field for Iraqi children. These days, the "good" news has more to do with whether Iraqi troops have the stuff necessary to militarily confront sectarian militias, whether attacks by insurgents have dropped from 50 a day to 25, whether daily Iraqi civilian deaths are in the dozens instead of the hundreds, and whether the situation has descended into a full-blown civil war or whether a civil war is still in the offing. To paraphrase bluesman Albert King's song "Born Under a Bad

Sign, "If it wasn't for bad news, there would be no news at all."

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